Reflections on the UN

Adolfo Aguilar Zinser

Photo courtesy of the Government of Michoacán.

Adolfo Aguilar Zinser addresses the U.S.–Mexico Futures Forum as Steve Silberstein and California State Senator Gil Cedillo look on.

On February 27, 2005, Adolfo Aguilar Zinser spoke to participants of the U.S.–Mexico Futures Forum in Morelia, Mexico about his role as Mexican Ambassador to the UN Security Council. The following are excerpts from his remarks.

The U.S. did not go to the UN to ask for our permission to go to war. And we have to have this very clear. Right after President Bush made his speech at the UN, there was a reception, and I was at the reception that afternoon. President Bush told me, "Now the buck is on you. It's on the UN, and it's on representatives of the UN." That was clearly what he meant by going to the UN.

Ambassador Negroponte further clarified things for me when I visited him several months later. Probably he saw me, with sleepless eyes, shaking with a sense of responsibility. He said, "Adolfo, you shouldn't be so worried. I perceive that you feel that the world is on Mexico's shoulders. That's not the case. The United States is going to make the decision. It is not the Security Council who will decide. You will only have to determine whether you endorse that decision or not. That's the key to the role you are going to play: whether you endorse that decision or not. That is what your country will have to decide on the Security Council. We will make the rest of the decisions."

Well, what did that mean for Mexico? Mexico's dilemma began with to be or not to be on the Council. And that dilemma has lasted since 1947, the year we were first on the Council. But when we went back to the Security Council this time, we decided this was the right thing to do. And it was the right thing to do because Mexico was becoming a democratic country as a result of the 2000 elections. We had come of age; we were grown strong and ready. There were two currents of opinions inside Mr. Fox's

government. The traditional foreign policy view was that Mexico was ready to play in the big leagues of world affairs, keeping its independence from the United States and maintaining the integrity of its foreign policy. The other current of opinion said, "OK, we're ready; we're grown up, and it is the time to prove to the United States that we are allies." And where is the best place to prove it? The Security Council.

It's very interesting because it was perceived that Mexico would either gain strength by, in one view, supporting the United States or, in the other, by maintaining an independent position. Those who wanted to support the United States had the idea that we were going to be cooking "the big enchilada" in the oven of the Security Council. That's where Mexico would prove to the United States that Mexico was a partner and an ally to be rewarded with 4 million visas for Mexicans living in the United States. That's the kind of thing that allies give each other. You think that I'm joking, but it's not a joke. That was exactly the rationale that went on in the head of the foreign minister at the time. It was a way of proving our friendship to the United States.

This brings us to the dilemma of friendship. Does friendship plus independence equal partnership? That was the view of being independent on the Security Council. Or does friendship plus allegiance mean partnership? That was the other paradigm of relations between Mexico and the United States.

Well, what happened in the Security Council? It was pure historic chance that precisely when Mexico joined the Security Council, the United States decided to bring the big thing to the UN. It was not planned. It happened that way, so we had to face the situation.

The U.S. brought its case to the Security Council on the basis — and very clearly on the basis — of the existence of weapons of mass destruction, not on the basis of the existence of a bad human rights regime in Iraq. This was probably debated by the international community, but it was not the case presented at the Security Council. The United States did not argue for removal of Saddam Hussein's regime. We have to put it in those terms because the Security Council is a legal body and a political

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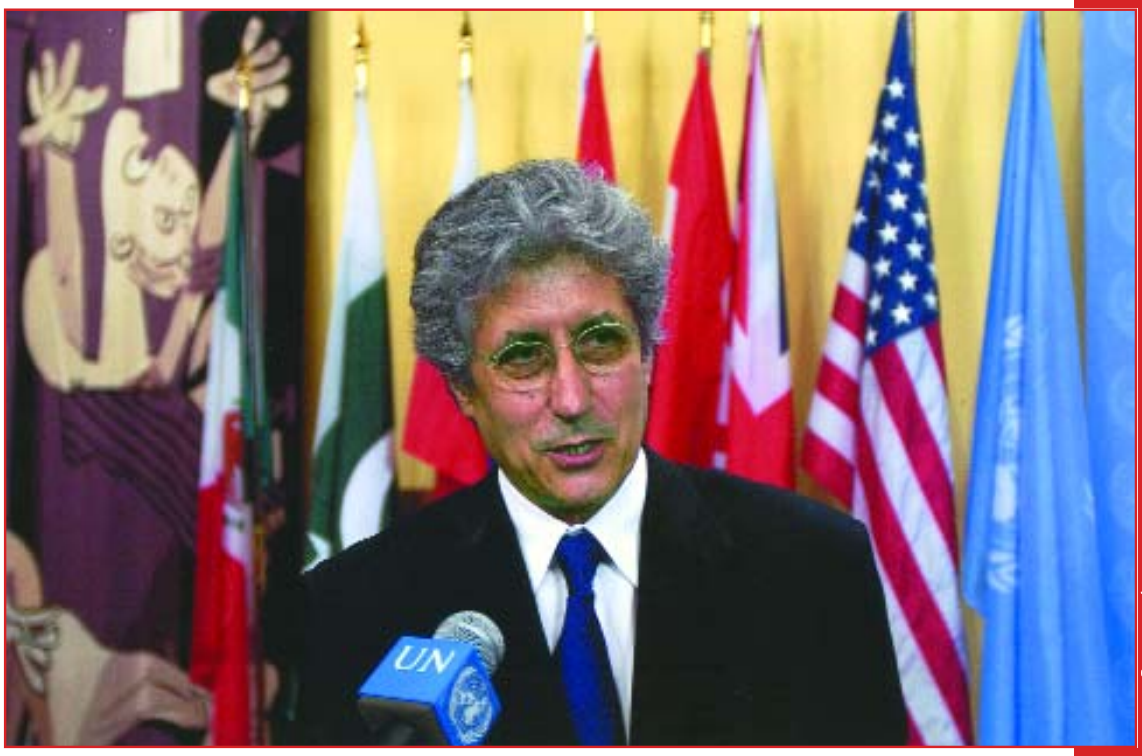

Ambassador Aguilar Zinser speaks at the UN during the debate over Iraq.

Photo courtesy of Adolfo Aguilar Zinser.

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body, mostly a political body, but it has to make decisions based on international law. Regime change was not even mentioned in President Bush's speech. He discussed an imminent threat to international security due to the certain existence of the weapons. They did not tell us that the weapons might exist, that they had some kind of suspicion. No, the Americans and Ambassador Negroponte said unequivocally, day after day, that the weapons were there.

The United States argued that the UN was useless in deterring Sadam Hussein from acquiring and using weapons of mass destruction. But the evidence provided by the presence of the UN in Iraq was to the contrary. The deterrence was working. Containment was working. There was a lot of speculation about how well or how badly, but every day it became more evident that containment and deterrence were working. And the United States became ever more impatient with the notions of deterrence and containment. It wanted to shorten the time the UN was given to prove its case because the U.S. had made other plans. So Mexico restricted its position on the Security Council to strictly the legal considerations: we did not find any evidence of imminent threat, much less of the existence of the weapons.

…

What was the basis for Mexico's decision? Well, first of all, the legality of the issue and secondly, the institutional integrity of the UN. These are two fundamental things for Mexico's foreign policy — fundamental things that are in our history. But they are not enough. The next stage of the argument was: how was it going to effect U.S.–Mexican relations? And this was not discussed in New York; this was not debated in the Security Council; it was not in the dialogue in the Mexican mission and the U.S. mission. This was discussed in Mexico City. What happened there was, I think, very damaging for U.S.–Mexican relations. Mexico was never clear with the U.S. It never told things as they were.

I, as the ambassador in the UN was saying one thing (I was saying this with instructions; not on my own, with instructions), but this was going to Washington, and Washington was saying to Mexico, "What is your ambassador doing?" "Well, he is doing his job." But I was doing my job with the intention of preventing the Security Council from endorsing a resolution in favor of the use of force. So in Washington they didn't really know what to think. And they tended to think that Mexico was simply playing a little bit of politics in the Council, but that Mexico was really willing to endorse them. And they got that impression until the end of the day. And that was very wrong because we were not going to endorse it.

The consideration regarding the United States, and I think it is important to underline it, was: Could Mexico maintain an independent position of this magnitude in the UN Security Council without seriously damaging U.S.–Mexican relations? There were two schools of thought. One said, "No, Mexico does not have the capacity, does not have the strength. We have jumped too high up into the big leagues, and this is something we cannot afford. We cannot vote against the United States; Mexico would suffer dearly for it." Others, including myself, thought that we could do it, that the cost of not doing it was going to be higher because of the political cost internally and because of the cost in terms of the integrity of Mexico's foreign policy and the prestige of Mexico in the UN.

There were two key issues discussed in the cabinet. One was: what was in the strategic interest of Mexico? And secondly: how would it really affect the relationship with the United States? My argument was that our strategic interest was not to endorse this war because endorsing it would make Mexico a partner in a war that we didn't want… [By not endorsing the

Photo courtesy of the Government of Michoacán.

Adolfo Aguilar Zinser chats with Prof. Lydia Chávez, Sen. Silvia Hernández and Jorge Alcocer at the U.S.–Mexico Futures Forum in Morelia.

war,] we would strengthen our relation with the United States because the U.S. would know that we had reached that level of maturity. We could be trusted on those things that we were doing together, but we could also disagree respectfully.

There were two other considerations that the president took into account in making his final decision. One was the popularity of the issue in Mexico. The polls were very high in favor of not supporting the U.S. And secondly, he had to consider the political environment. All the political forces in Mexico, including those who were most favorable to the United States, were convinced that this was something that Mexico could not afford.

The decision was made in those terms, but I think that there were two main problems with the decision. One was that it was not communicated properly. I was instructed to make Mexico's position official one week before the war broke out, when we did not know whether the U.S. was going to withdraw the resolution from the table. I notified my colleagues in the Security Council that this was Mexico's decision. But the President of Mexico did not notify President Bush. So that created another week of confusion, and I think it was very costly to U.S.–Mexican relations. There is nothing better for the U.S. and Mexico than frankness, sincerity and maturity in our dealings with each other. Secondly, it was very confusing internally as well. Grandiose speeches made a kind of empty space, so a lot of people in Mexico thought President Fox had made the right decision with the wrong rhetoric.

So that is how the whole thing happened and that's why I am here now.

Thank you.